

# Nigun Poems

**Jake Marmer**

## Preface

This set of poems grew out of my experiences of listening and finding myself inside nigunim (pl; singular nigun or nign), Chassidic chants—mystical, usually wordless songs used as accompaniment for rituals—weddings, prayers, candle-lightings—collective beckoning of transcendence. The nigun experience is fraught with what Amiri Baraka called, referring to blues, the “re/feeling”—proximity and shape of personal history of encounters with unfathomable.

Because most of the nigunim did not have lyrics they were comprised of scat—but a somber sort of a scat: “oi-oi”, “di-dai”, “bah-bom”, etc. Musical instruments were not used to accompany them, either, since most of the singing happened on the Sabbath, when instruments were put away. Rid of accompaniment, rid of lyrics, these stripped down chants were visceral and prayer-like but washed out of content, and filled, instead, with implication—with attempts. At the climax of one of his talks, balancing at the edge of the cognitive void, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov reportedly said: “And even to this, too, there’s an answer. But that answer is necessarily a song.”

These poems attempt to reimagine the sensation of locating oneself inside a nigun.

Induction into Nigun<sup>1</sup>

people turn into rocks  
song like water  
beats between them

1. This poem was originally published in the *New Vilna Review* in March 2012

## Blanket Nigun

what this blanket weighs  
for days, yr muscles will remember  
feet land on the floor  
so cold you begin to feel  
a tonic sled, under another  
you, under another  
blanket, heavier, bigger, what  
it weighs you may never  
know—

the cold—  
is inside the vision  
as blankness, your voice  
nesting, missing feathers  
lifting off

you  
begin  
to feel

### Painters' Nigun

*On hearing Frank London's H.W.N.*

this is a song of people painting walls  
walls of a shul that doesn't exist

paint rolls upwards  
    pulled by other gravities

you could celebrate a bris a yontef

air thickening with paint—

inanimate painted  
with breath  
    breathes  
    as it is said:  
“living words”

painting walls on the scaffolding of a drum solo  
of fists banging a table which is a real table it's really here  
but the scaffolding is full of paint the scaffolding is a face  
of the shul that doesn't exist

the sound rises like an animal and walks  
    moving its burden  
to the pit  
    in the shul a pit built for the chazzan  
as it is said “from the depth . . .”

this yontef commemorates what  
has never happened

but the paint the paint  
rolls like walls stands like sea

walls standing  
    mercurially

Nigun Au Rebours

this song is not an act but erasure

the way other songs reach into you

    this one retreats,

        taking with it stuff that seemed nailed to the floor

this song is cinematic in its reel

you may find yourself humming its residue

you may wonder who you're

    feeding—

through the song's straw that ascends

to the pouting mouth

    of the vanishing point

### Root–Note Nigun

this nigun is about a stick figure  
and the wind over canvas  
that bared it—

it's about a two–bone  
abstraction, a solitary root  
note, resounding its stripped chorus  
no aesthetics beyond instinct—

this nigun is about a scratch,  
a typo, doodle of person—dropped  
into an impressionist painting  
amidst the ball of flesh and color

and it knows there must be a mistake  
and mumbles all it ever knows to mumble  
—“I exist”—“I exist”—“I exist”—  
a note bent in and out of the question

this nigun is about a stick figure  
imagining it could change its fate  
by lifting its stick–figure hands  
heavenward

Cecil's Scarecrow Nigun

*for Anthony Coleman*

this nigun is a scarecrow

in your old clothes  
it looks a little bit like you—  
a no-thanks-prophecy—

the fence: scarecrow's  
stage and metalepsis

melody lint,  
limp sleeves and run-on paint

everybody here forgets  
what they came for—

newly unknotted,  
turn  
into congregants  
dissipating in their coats

the nigun *shuckles*, rocks  
alone  
victorious  
creaking guardian

in the field of pure color

### Amphibian Nigun

needle threads nothingness  
hunks of it  
    transparent slices of ice  
a dress  
good for running up and down  
the stairs  
    of the ancestral dream  
ice quickly goes  
New York  
    ice always does  
melting ripples around your face  
it's the puddle-waltz—  
for a minute you remember  
there's a world at the bottom  
of your stomach  
peopled with memories  
sad eyes, winking—  
and when you raise your head and ask for a drink  
someone shows you to the ocean  
and says welcome to your new life  
under the water